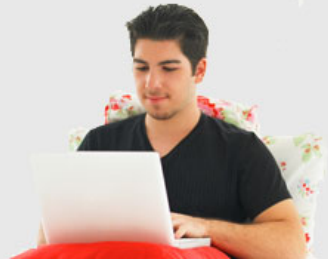


Summer 2007



ACCURACY'S IMPACT ON RESEARCH
A Knowledge Networks Newsletter



The New Media Effect on Political Participation

An Interview with Markus Prior

Do your information sources help determine whether you'll vote? That's just one of the provocative questions addressed by Dr. Markus Prior in his recent book, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. We spoke with Dr. Prior, Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, and winner of the 2005 E.E. Schattschneider prize — an annual award for the best doctoral dissertation in the field of American government. Based on his dissertation, Prior's book traces the development of U.S. media and focuses on today's extensive media choice. Using survey data from KnowledgePanel[®], the publication sets new benchmarks in the political media landscape and argues that nowadays, political information can be easily by-passed — depending on the consumer's taste — by an endless variety of entertainment outlets. Knowledge Networks (KN) spoke with Dr. Prior earlier this summer; our interview follows.



Your survey experiment shows that the "Information Age," with more media choice, is actually creating disparity in political knowledge — to the extent that it's affecting voter turnout.

Yes, isn't it curious that we haven't seen an uptick in turnout or in political knowledge levels in the public? Previous research mostly has found that new media — such as the Internet or, before it, cable television — matter very little for learning about politics and encouraging participation. However, those studies often just include a main effect for Internet access or use. But that's assuming that everyone is affected the same way — an unrealistic assumption. In contrast, I show that new media have profound effects on learning, turnout, and more. Some people learn a lot more than they used to; others learn a lot less. So the effects are not the same for everybody, but they are fairly large for many people. Greater media choice allows people to watch and read what they want. For instance, you can get a lot of sports now — including live events, repeats, endless statistics, and sports blogs — so political information is being replaced among people who prefer sports to politics.

Does this cost people in the end, even though they're much happier with all this choice? That is the big question.

Casual observers and scholars alike look at the relatively stable percentage of Americans who vote (since the early 1970s, when there was no cable TV) or at the relatively stable political knowledge levels, and they conclude that little has changed. But this perception ignores that some people may go to the polls a lot more reliably, whereas others don't go at all anymore. Some people know a lot more; others a lot less than before. In short, even if the mean is stable, the variance may change. It has — and political involvement is less equal than in the past.

Do you see the dynamic of “News Seekers vs. Entertainment Seekers” transforming the playing field in the 2008 election?

Now that entertainment seekers don't have to sift through the news, they're dropping out. You're losing a relatively moderate segment and gaining participation among the people who were partisan to begin with. So you get something that looks like polarized elections — but it's not because anyone's views are changing, it's just because different kinds of people participate now. The following is a very general statement, but I think that convincing moderates, or people who are indifferent politically, is going to become more important. It takes a lot to get them to the polls. If it's an exciting election like 2004, then many may go, and you'll get less polarization (and you'll get more people who are not as strongly committed initially and perhaps more open to arguments). But in a more typical election that isn't as close, these people will just stay home.

What aspect of Knowledge Networks drew you to partner with us?

I chose Internet research for several reasons. To measure what people like in terms of media content by phone, you'd have to go through a long list of genres or program types — that's easier done visually. And face-to-face surveys are usually expensive. Plus Knowledge Networks uses a graphic interface that allowed me to do some things that I couldn't have done otherwise. Compared to other samples interviewed via the Internet, the Knowledge Networks sample is more representative of the U.S. population. This is important for my research, because I have to cover the whole spectrum of media content preferences, from a strong interest in news and politics to a strong preference for entertainment.

Many online convenience samples probably over-represent the politically interested, especially when respondents know in advance that the survey is going to be about current events. Of course, whenever possible, researchers should rely on more than one data source. In my book, I complement Knowledge Networks data with survey data collected by the National Election Study, which uses mostly face-to-face interviewing and Pew surveys, which are conducted by phone.

Were the multimedia capabilities of KnowledgePanel[®] helpful in other ways?

Probably the most interesting thing was to use pictures when I tried to measure what people know about politics. Traditionally, investigators have almost always used verbal questions — for example, “How many terms can the president serve in office?” But we couldn't ask, “Who is the person shown in this photograph?” because it's impossible over the phone. But you can do that with the Web, so that's essentially what I tried in a variety of ways — to see whether people who have this verbal kind of knowledge are also good at recognizing politicians.

Did you consider using telephone for your News and Entertainment survey in the book, considering that the second wave was longitudinal?

I didn't. The longitudinal aspect is easy with KnowledgePanel[®], because you keep contact with a large number of people. Many of the people we tried to re-contact about a year and a half later were still reachable, so it was possible to re-interview them, and we got a high response rate. To be fair, both phone surveys and Knowledge Networks have certain unique advantages or certain things you can only do with one mode; but for my work, the graphic interface really is important.

How are the changes you have observed in media usage prompting political parties and organizations to use media differently?

If you're a political party or a candidate, and you want to reach potential voters — via television — you have the choice to advertise in segments that offer news and political information, or you can advertise in prime time, when there is mostly entertainment. And this is becoming important, because now you're reaching two different segments depending on where you go. In the news segments, you're reaching an informed segment of the population, so it becomes harder to make simple arguments there; these people will actually know quite a bit, and it will be difficult to convince them with a 30-second ad. On the other hand, if you advertise during prime time or in the context of entertainment programming, then you're reaching a population that really doesn't watch as much news anymore, and they don't come to your commercials with all that much political information. Persuading this segment to vote for you might be easier, but you can't count on these people to go to polls. So your money might be wasted.

For political advertisers, there may be more riding on the ad's impact these days.

Yes, at least with the entertainment fans, as I call them in my book. But there are two perspectives: one considers this group defenseless when watching political advertisements; the other says, "If it weren't for political advertising, entertainment fans wouldn't be exposed to any political information at all" (and there is research showing that people learn from political ads). One could argue that exposure to political ads, even if they are perhaps manipulative sometimes, is better than no exposure to political information at all.

Do you suspect that we'll see more attempts on the part of political advertisers to meld these two segments, possibly similar to Hillary Clinton's attempt at humor in her June campaign video?

That's a great question. *The Daily Show*, for example, has attracted a lot of attention. So where does that fall in my argument? *The Daily Show* is an example of the segment of programming that mixes entertainment and news. One aspect is that viewers of *The Daily Show* actually are very well informed politically, so you don't get people who are looking for pure entertainment. Entertainment seekers are going to watch a Hollywood blockbuster or some other entertainment show instead, so these genres that mix news and entertainment — actually they don't draw huge audiences. So *The Daily Show* still has a very small audience compared to either the network news or entertainment programming in prime time. There is probably a First Law of Media Content here somewhere: The more information you try to sneak into an entertainment program, the less attractive it becomes for true entertainment fans. And the more likely you are to reach an audience that also watches hard news.

None of this means that Hillary Clinton or any other candidate should not try to be funny. Funny or not, however, it's going to be difficult for any politician to reach entertainment fans and get them to the polls. Most days, politics cannot compete when it comes to entertainment value.

What are your future research goals?

What comes out of this book is that it matters a lot what kind of preferences people have for different media content — what their tastes are, and what kind of media content they like. So if there's one big finding of the book, it's that these preferences matter — a lot more than twenty or thirty years ago. But the thing that the book doesn't answer, and the question that's difficult to get at is this: “Where do these preferences come from in the first place?” “Why is it that I like news and politics, and my brother doesn't? We had the same parents, and we grew up in the same place and went to the same school. How did he develop preferences for things that have less to do with politics?” That's a crucial question that's very interesting to me, and I hope to be making some progress in the next couple of years.

Dr. Markus Prior, *Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University*



Photo copyright John Roemer/Woodrow Wilson School